



# A Relational Approach to Learning Environments: Learning from Pacific Wisdom

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Received: 12 August 2021 / Accepted: 21 December 2021 / Published online: 30 January 2022  
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## Abstract

A relational approach focusses on connections between things, assuming that all things exist in relatedness. In this article, attention is given to the relationship between innovative learning environments (ILE) as described in literature, and elements of the field of Pacific education. In order to investigate this relationship, I take a layered approach, attending to five relational matters. First, I ask how relationships are configured between key elements within ILE thinking. Second, I examine what the literature of Pacific education says about how relationships can be understood. Third, I investigate the relational space between ILE thinking and Pacific Education. Next, I describe some aspects of three innovative Pacific educational spaces. And finally, I seek to learn from these deliberately configured educational spaces. The inquiry trajectory grounds discussions of literature and theory in innovative practice, a significant move where the intent is to offer support for innovative educational spaces that might be beneficial to Pacific (and other non-majority) students.

**Keywords** Pacific/Pasifika education · Va/vā · Innovative learning environment · Relationality · Aotearoa New Zealand · Space

## Introduction

This article follows the relational turn, assuming that ‘all things exist in relatedness’ (Tynan, 2021, p. 601). A fundamental aspect of this approach is a reality of connect-edness (Tynan, 2021; Wendt, 1999). This makes relevant a focus on how things are together. The article brings together thinking from fields that co-exist in education in a relatively unexplored relationship: innovative learning environments (ILE) and Pacific education. In order to focus on this relationship in a nuanced way, the fields are investigated separately and then brought together. The ILE field is addressed

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through literature and is approached by describing tangible and intangible ILE elements and their relationships. The aim is to examine what these relationships tell us about ILE thinking. Then, Pacific education (also called Pasifika education) is introduced. This is the education in Aotearoa New Zealand of students with links of one kind or another to one or more Pacific Islands (Airini et al., 2010), an umbrella term (Samu, 2006) for the education of diverse peoples. Here, Pacific education is used as a heuristic with which to think about the significance of Pacific culture(s) (and culture more generally) when thinking about relationality, the state of being related (Sanga et al., 2018). Next, the Pacific concept of relational space, *vā*, is employed as a way of generating criticality concerning the relationship between ILEs and Pacific education. Then, some Pacific innovated learning spaces are described before some key points of learning are offered.

Before starting on the main journey, it is appropriate to give a relational account of the writer and to discuss the significance of naming.

## Relational Positionality

Although positionality is sometimes discussed in terms of categories used to plot a researcher on an insider–outsider dichotomy (Merriam et al., 2001), positionality can also be thought of in relational terms (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019). I offer a layered account of my position relative to the fields under discussion.

In this exploration of the relational space between ILE and Pacific education, I am a learner aiming to contribute to the progress of Pacific students and their teachers. I am from an Anglo-Welsh background; an educator of 35+ years' experience who works in a system where the virtues of 'new' kinds of learning environments are frequent expounded. I also work with and for Pacific students. Returning from a year at a Tongan school, I was challenged by a Samoan parent to 'do something for us.' Thus, I began a PhD that involved a group of teachers, including myself, changing our pedagogy in response to learning from Pacific students, parents and community members. One key area was to think about relational spaces. The present inquiry stems from my role in supporting teachers, including teachers of Pacific learners, in redeveloped learning environments.

## The Significance of Naming

Names are relational. They carry whakapapa, convey attitudes and, being both inclusionary and exclusionary, affect how the named is understood (Sanga & Reynolds, 2017). Although no agreed terminology for redesigned learning environments has been established, perhaps a symptom of under-theorisation (Benade, 2021), two names are dealt with here.

The term 'modern' (Bradbeer, 2016; Osborne, 2013) is sometimes used to describe redesigned learning environments, setting up a relationship between teaching spaces of different era. This relationship is mediated through time and perhaps uncritically values the new for its own sake. The term modern is often used

to dismiss spatial arrangements negatively associated with the factory (Blackmore et al., 2011; Morrison & Kedian, 2017; Osborne, 2013) in the form of the ‘industrialised single-cell classroom’ (Benade, 2021, p. S21). The use of the term rejects a European past but has little to say of Pacific pasts.

Redesigned learning environments are also named ‘innovative’ (Bradbeer et al., 2017; Jensen, 2019; Morrison & Kedian, 2017). Innovation speaks of a process of adjustment and gradual change, setting up a relationship where one kind of space is valued more because it is different to another. However, the term innovation is challenged by Healy (2016) who argues that while ILE discourse may create ‘a new grammar of schooling by promoting one incarnation of learning space’ (p. 236) it distracts attention from many other prior and present innovations. This privileges one direction of learning space development but erases other, non-hegemonic directions, including any derived from Pacific wisdom. Despite this caveat, a matter to which the argument will return, this discussion uses the term innovation for convenience because the name ILE is gaining currency in Aotearoa New Zealand (Bradbeer et al., 2017). Next, a sketch of the main elements of the ILE field is provided.

## A Relational Approach to ILE Thinking

### Elements of ILE

In order to discuss what can be learned about ILEs from a relational approach, there is value in examining the elements of the field. Writers such as Bisset (2014) and Blackmore et al. (2011) helpfully organise ILE discussion into tangible and intangible aspects. Tangibles are generally ‘hard’ material aspects of ILEs (Bisset, 2014; Cantero et al., 2016). Intangible elements include flexibility of practice; a porous approach to who is a teacher and learner; personalisation; and socially constructed, student-initiated, authentically located learning. Intangibles, therefore, are ‘soft’ social and relational aspects of ILEs (Bisset, 2014; Osborne, 2013).

### Relating Tangible and Intangible Elements

In the literature, a number of relational configurations link tangible and intangible elements. In some cases, the configuration can seem simplistic. Bradbeer (2016) points to an aspirational tone in some ILE literature and a tendency to determinism. Blackmore et al. (2011) note the depiction in literature of linear relationships between learning spaces, the ways they are used, and the learning outcomes of students. In these direct relationships, agency is held by the build not the learner.

However, other more complex integrated relationships have been described. Cantero et al. (2016) point to the significance of space, ‘proper use’, and improvement (p. 249) as key ILE aspects. Bisset (2014) suggests that changes in tangible elements enable shifts in intangible elements; Jensen (2019) relates the elements through a jigsaw metaphor. Integrated relationships are two way and contingent. However, agency may be focussed on those who define ‘proper’ activity and pedagogy.

Ecological relationships are also present in the ILE field. Blackmore et al. (2011) describe symbolic relationships between physical elements—such as classroom layout, and intangible elements—such as cultural understandings and educational philosophies. Gislason (2010) relates tangible and intangible elements holistically so that ecology, organisation, culture and milieu form the learning environment. These relational configurations attend to external entities that affect the elements of ILEs. In these relational configurations, agency sits both inside and outside the learning space.

However, the ecology imagined in ILE writing is not always wide. In ILE literature, culture tends to be located at the institutional level. For example, Davies et al. (2013) and others (Gislason, 2010; Nelson et al., 2021) refer to educational culture but without demonstrating clearly from where that culture derives. Learners seem free to reinvent relationships with knowledge and teachers at the classroom level, but wider relational innovations that articulate with potential cultural plurality are not represented. This exemplifies Healy's (2016) critique of the way 'innovation' is understood because there appear to be limits placed on what is and is not subject to change.

It seems that relationality is not consistently dealt with in ILE discourse. Linear, integrated and ecologic relationships are imagined between ILE elements and as drivers of innovation. When an ecologic approach is adopted, this is limited in scope. Agency is sometimes placed with build and sometimes with teachers. Where learner agency exists, it is bounded. Thus, more thorough theorisation of relationality has much to offer ILE thinking.

Having examined what can be learned from a relational approach to ILEs, attention is now directed to Pacific education.

## Relationality in Pacific Education

### Pacific Education

Pacific peoples in New Zealand are diverse, significant ethnic minority groups due to their demographic profiles and socio-economic locations (Statistics New Zealand, 2020). The field of Pacific education has developed in areas such as early childhood (Leaupepe & Luama Sauni, 2014), bilingual (Si'ilata, 2014), and digital education (Enari & Matapo, 2020).

Pacific students have been poorly served by education in Aotearoa New Zealand (Naepi, 2019) judged by achievement data (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2019), curriculum representation (Siteine & Samu, 2011) and student experience (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2018). Recent developments in the field include the Pacific Education Action Plan (Ministry of Education, 2020) and Tapasā (Ministry of Education, 2018), a resource for teachers, both the result of community consultation. However, the area waits for more evidence of wholesale educational re-thinking (Matapo, 2019) so that the relationship between Pacific students and the education system makes being Pacific an advantage, and 'success as Pacific' (Reynolds, 2017; Si'ilata et al., 2017; Toumu'a, 2014) is delivered.

## Va/Vā and Tā

A relevant Pacific theoretical and cultural reference is *va* or *vā*, relational space. Various understandings of this concept can be found in Samoan (Anae, 2016), Tongan (Koloto, 2017), Tokelauan (Hoem, 1993) and other Pacific traditions of thinking. Here, Samoan orthography, *va*, will generally be used. Among the more frequently cited accounts of *va* is that of Wendt (1999) who writes of ‘the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates’ (p. 402). Ka’ili (2005) contrasts this view with Western ideas of space as empty or open. The ‘conceptual terrain’ of the *va* is extensive (Tuagalua, 2008, p. 109), shaping thought and life, an ‘imagined space that we “feel” as opposed to see’ (Mila-Schaaf, 2006, p. 11).

Tongan writers (e.g., Kalavite, 2019; Māhina, 2004, 2010) link time and space in *tā-vā* theory; these concepts are ‘at the core of all things that exist, in a single level of reality, as in nature, mind and society’ (Kalavite, 2019, p. 175). The literature makes clear the importance to Pacific students of an appreciation of *tā* (Kalavite, 2019; Māhina, 2008) and of well cared-for relationships understood through *va* (Fonua, 2018; Mara, 2011; Reynolds, 2017; Tuagalua, 2008). Despite the importance of time, I concentrate on *va*, relational space, as a key concept of value when considering relationality, innovation and educational space. *Va* conceptualises relationality as not optional but existent. Each relational space is its own *va*. *Va* embrace multi-dimensionality across spiritual, social and physical domains to include the animate and inanimate.

There are obligations to care for the *va*. The Samoan reference for this is *teu le va* (Airini et al., 2010; Anae, 2010), and the Tongan, *tauhi vā* (Ka’ili, 2005; Koloto, 2017). This is a matter of valuing, nurturing and tidying the *va* if need be (Anae, 2010), an act that may not be easy or straightforward. Interaction produces untidiness that requires constant attention (Anae, 2010). Refiti (2015) suggests that in an Aotearoa New Zealand context, *teu le va* embraces ‘a new dynamism within a democratically shared space of inclusiveness, to counter the Western notion of the individual self’ (p. 18). Significant in this context, Pacific education is a relational field that enables ‘a critical stance, with greater emphasis on the ontological and ethical implications of space’ (Benade, 2021 p. S24).

## Relating ILE Thinking and Pacific Education

Creating a critical space where the literatures of ILE and Pacific education can ‘speak’ to each other highlights diverse ways space, culture and time can be understood.

## Space

Although Lefebvre (1991) recognised space as socially constructed (Benade, 2021; Bradbeer, 2016), there has been little ILE attention to how space is understood or used, or how culture and gender relationally affect ILE contexts (Blackmore et al., 2011). If we need an ‘ontology of spatiality that ...[does] not treat “space” as dead, inert or ethically neutral’ (Stewart & Benade, 2020, p. 130), paying attention to va is helpful. Va offers a reference with which to appreciate space in ways that account for the relational, layered and ethical significance of culture, gender, age, and so in education. The concept provides a consistent lens through which relationality in ILE contexts may be understood.

## Culture

A helpful definition of culture is ‘a system of logic with its own underpinning assumptions and internal coherence’ (Mila Schaaf & Hudson, 2009, p. 115). It is the ‘knowledge you construct to show how acts in the context of one world can be understood as coherent from the point of view in another world’ (Agar, 1996, p. 33). Culture in ILE literature tends to be inward looking, imagined within the institution. Where cultures are identified, they are generally non-Western (Jensen, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2016). However, culture in Pacific education is holistic, a vibrant element of identity (Ministry of Education, 2018, 2020). In educational spaces in Aotearoa New Zealand, Pacific cultures are in relation to other cultures, including the Western-origin culture of schooling, often in ways that demand acts of edge-walking (Tupuola, 2004) of Pacific learners. An ecology that embraces wide spaces beyond those immediately seen as educational recognises the va between cultures and pays attention to how relationships between them are configured.

## Space and Culture

Milne’s (2013) term ‘white space’ brings space and culture together. It accounts for the ubiquity of certain cultural assumptions, practices and power flows in educational spaces. Through the invisibility of whiteness, the dominant culture appears as an absence, emptiness or liminality. This is the silenced cultural base that informs ideas of institutional culture in ILE literature. Thinking about space through va as multi-dimensional, relational and subject to ethics is to think of an *alternative* culture to the logic of current practice. This asks decolonising questions about the ‘proper use’ (Cantero et al., 2016, p. 249) of space in ILEs, how space might be ‘inhabited’ (Imms et al., 2016, p. 5) by Pacific (and other) people and, more generally, the place of culture and reflexive thinking in ILE discourse.

## Culture, Space and Time

An example of a cultural assumption is the way the past is thought about. Remembering the history of spaces ‘highlights the origins of those spaces, the implications

for practice and the legacy of those decisions upon current understandings' (Coleman & Luton, 2021, p. S168). As discussed, ILE writers sometime imagine innovation as a 'modern' break from previous factory models of education. However, in the Pacific past educational spaces were colonial. Colonial education involves relationships of 'power over', including the power, tacit or voiced, of one set of values and understandings over another. The rejection of colonial models of education involves deep-seated changes in relationships (Naepi et al., 2017).

Pacific wisdom, rooted in the past but relevant in the present, can make significant contributions to educational change. It can provide navigation through a balance that does not value the modern for its own sake but involves 'walking backwards into the future while facing the past' (Refiti, 2015, p. 49). This suggests the value to innovation of understanding that educational space contains multiple histories. These relate to educational forebears, the origins of current use, the backgrounds and experiences of those present, and the history of any visions for the future. A relational approach to educational space recognises these complexities, and this is a worthwhile contribution to thought about innovation in this area.

### Three Innovative Pacific Educational Spaces

The different origins of formal education in Aotearoa New Zealand and Pacific learners create a need for negotiation. Some significant educational spaces have been constructed that bridge between understandings such as the Fale Pasifika at the University of Auckland, 'a commitment... to Pacific culture' (Treadwell, 2005, p. 110), 'navigated along a line running between modernity and tradition... stretched across great voids to connect two worlds' (p. 115). How have people in school contexts responded to the challenge of creating learning spaces that equitably bring together the worlds of Pacific students and formal education in innovative ways? Two brief examples illustrate the breadth of response in the literature, the significance of context, and specific outcomes of Pacific/non-Pacific negotiation. Together the examples create a platform for an account of my own experience.

### Contextuality and Outcome in Pacific Education Spaces

Gorinski (2005) describes the Pacific Islands School Community Parent Liaison Project (PISCPL), an initiative focussed on enhancing Pacific parental involvement in school. During the project, innovations included homework or study support centres for Pacific students operating immediately after school, staffed by Pacific parents and/or educators. These spaces, organised through a Pacific community member, brought relational benefits through one-to-one adult-learner and parent-teacher contact. Pacific parental responses to the innovation focused on the timely completion of schoolwork; teachers focussed on enhanced work quality.

A different kind of innovative Pacific learning space is described by Kēpa (2019), based on work by Kēpa and Manu'atu (2006). Kēpa (2019) recounts the history of Po Ako (teaching and learning in the night), a Tongan community initiative in

partnership with an Auckland secondary school. During Po Ako, extensive talanoa, a Pacific orality that frames critical dialogue (Fa'avae et al., 2016), took place in Tongan language with and among parents. This enabled community and school cultural frames of education to be discussed together. Youthful Tongan tutors were employed to support student learning and, over time, transformation through the 'interconnection of theory and practice' resulted in the 'social and educational change' (p. 295) sought for Po Ako.

A synthesis of these two innovative spaces in Pacific education shows that context is important; there is no one formula for an innovative Pacific educational space. In Gorinski's (2005) account, the innovative learning space was supported by multiple Pacific communities and embraced Pacific students as an ethnically diverse group. The timing placed the initiative close to the school day and the va of the space fostered relational closeness that included parents. However, the vision seems not to have deliberately challenged school culture but to have been focused on support for students in their schoolwork.

Conversely, Kēpa's (2019) account of Po Ako is of an innovative space capable of challenging the operation of school culture in its relation to Tongan culture. Talanoa in Tongan enabled the intellectual traditions of the Tongan community to come into negotiation with school cultural expectations. Peer-tutors enhanced community-school links and provided academic role modelling of a kind not often found in schools. The timing offered opportunities for parents and community members to attend. Thus, the vision extended well beyond student output to embrace lasting cultural transformation of the wider context, including considerable Tongan community input in a space of reciprocal learning with the school.

Key aspects that link these two accounts of innovative Pacific education spaces include consistent attention to relationships and the consequent involvement of community members in significant roles. Differences include vision, the degree of community ownership, timing, language and format. With these observations in mind, I account for my own experiences of supporting a Pacific learning space by considering the way context affected the relational genesis, vision, community involvement, and transformation of a particular innovative learning space.

## Pacific Study Sessions

The vision for what became known as the Pacific Study Session (PSS) series had its origins in student voice. In my doctoral study (Reynolds, 2017), I set out to serve my school's Pacific communities by learning about Pacific forms of success from Year 9 (13–14 years old) Pacific boys, their parents, and other community members. At the time, Pacific students in the urban, high-decile,<sup>1</sup> all-boys case study school were well-represented in sporting and cultural spaces, particularly through a Pacific performance group, Poly Club. However, their academic success was eclipsed by that of other groups, and there was no dedicated Pacific academic space. The voice data

<sup>1</sup> A high-decile school is situated in a high-socioeconomic area. Not all students need be from that area.

offered below was gathered within the ethical boundary of the doctorate by small group talanoa.

## Relational Genesis

The potential of an academic space to meet the needs and desires expressed by some of the school's young Pacific students grew on me in four ways: relationships, mutual support, the example of Poly Club, and as response to stereotypes.

First, in students' accounts the *va* of some classrooms was not inviting:

I am scared sometimes to ask questions because I don't want to get it wrong...

Some students' experiences and perceptions of race also led to poorly configured classroom relationships:

...the white guys, if you get the answer wrong, they stare...laugh at you... make fun of you...

Second, students spoke highly of the mutual support they experienced as members of a 'brotherhood'. For example,

Like if someone is not doing well with their homework, we always help them. Most people would say, 'No you do it yourself', but us PI [Pacific Island] boys, we always do it, we always help them.

Third, young Pacific boys described how they learned in Poly Club, a Pacific performance space:

Also, even confidence in, just speaking to people... maybe new people, you could be really nervous but they [the seniors] are teaching us not to... to do the opposite... to be confident...

Finally, the influence of negative stereotypes, obvious for example when an academically successful senior student involved in supporting the research declined to take some junior students to spend free moments in the school library:

'These are PI [Pacific Island] boys, they won't want to be reading. They won't want to be in the library.'

The words of my students ignited a desire to facilitate a space less cluttered by relational issues of shame, rejection and racism. Thus, I pursued the potential of peer relations to frame a *va* in which Pacific students' personal and spiritual comfort, and learning could be mutually enhancing. Attendance was voluntary; students could occupy the space as they wished; the type, volume and format of the work was driven by student priority; and senior students were the visible organisers. Aspects drawn from the accounts of Gorinski (2005) and Kēpa (2019) are illuminating in this context: vision; community involvement; and transformation.

## Vision

Informed by student voice, I developed with Pacific student leaders a relational vision for the study space. First, we tried to support a space with a va reminiscent of Poly Club. In this, mutual support could be focussed on academic study. Second, literature (Miller, 2017) and the students made clear the significance of one-to-one contact with teachers. Thus, the vision included opportunities for teachers to get to know students and vice versa. I hoped that teachers would offer help and the students would feel confident to ask for and receive it. Third, the vision included visible opportunities for leadership development among students, described below. Finally, I hoped that the visibility of the Pacific collective participating successfully in an academic space would have the potential to erode the relational negativity of stereotypical thinking amongst the brotherhood and teaching staff.

## Community Involvement

Members of the school's Pacific and teaching communities supported the PSS. At first, some parents came, but sessions at lunchtime and straight after school did not facilitate their frequent attendance. Instead, senior students became the community voice, adopting leadership roles in the study space. Their actions included advising on times for study unlikely to clash with sporting commitments; organising blessings for food, sometimes in a Pacific language; offering encouragement to younger students; and setting up the library. To maintain links between the study sessions and the wider community, social media postings were made immediately at the end of sessions. Some parents responded almost as quickly.

My most significant role was to remind the teaching community to attend. Some thought the value of their time was work-centred. A teacher might turn up, ask if anyone needed help with their specialism, and leave when this was not immediately the case. However, others came and encouraged whatever work was being done, or talked about matters of mutual interest. Some teachers explained they liked spending time with the Pacific boys, were building relationships for an unspecified later time, and/or liked the atmosphere. Some spoke of a deepening sense of connection.

## Transformation

The PSS operated for three years of my tenure at the school. During this period, several aspects evolved. Initially, Pacific student leaders asked for the students to work in close proximity, largely ignoring the open plan library in favour of a small mezzanine area. Later, students inhabited the whole library in flexible ways so that access to hard wired digital technology became available to supplement wi-fi. Perhaps there was an increased level of comfort for Pacific students to 'own' the whole space of the school's academic core, the library, an example of the 'propensity for people to [re-]colonise or appropriate spaces, potentially changing their original, intended use' (Wright et al., 2021, p. S51).

The timing also changed. Early on, requests for study sessions were around major academic deadlines. Later, relationships among the staff led to an arrangement where a Pacific student cohort moved together from the last lesson of the day to PSS and then on to Poly Club. This provided a powerful visible statement of belonging in both cultural and academic spaces, reinforcing a key aspect of the vision.

Finally, expectations changed in response to the sessions. Transforming culture in a school is a long-term relational matter. Over time, new cohorts of junior students arrived at a school where the PSS was a fixture. As a result, repeat attendees replaced a hit and miss pattern of attendance. A factor in this may have been that the study space created parental as well as student expectation.

Aspects of the PSS relate to the Pacific spaces of the PISCPL (Gorinski, 2005) and Po Ako (Kēpa, 2019). All three spaces attended to the completion of school-work. The direct community involvement of PSS lacked the width of PISCPL and coherence of Po Ako, but the visibility of Pacific student leadership and the use of social media to enhance relationships between school and home were other ways of involving community. A key aspect of the PSS was bringing Pacific students and non-Pacific educators together in a safe relational space, an echo of Ako Po. Pacific leadership was apparent in all three.

The significance of context can be seen across all three initiatives. In each case, the configuration of Pacific space responded to local circumstance. Timing, those present, the physical spaces in use, and the guiding vision responded to how the context was understood by Pacific community members and others. Finally, relationality provides a key lens to understand the dynamics at work. In all cases, a key purpose of the space was the fostering of relationships configured in ways that could benefit to Pacific learners and their communities.

## **Learning from Deliberately Configured Pacific Education Relational Spaces**

The need for innovation in educational space to which the PSS responded is clear from the student voice given above. Consequently, the PSS aimed to enact a vision of innovation focused on relationality, configured to expand the relational and cultural ecology of educational space to include Pacific communities.

Aspects of ILE thinking supported the PSS. These included tangles of an open plan library used in flexible ways, and digital connectivity. Intangibles included students organising their own study programmes (but not necessarily the material that constituted them), teachers and learners in side-on relationships (where neither was familiar with the learning area), and student–student collaboration. Despite the fact that it was not a place where students exercised full control over learning content, the enthusiasm of some students suggested that it was a welcome addition to their lives in the school.

A key aspect of the *va* seemed to be the recognisability of the space, modelled on Poly Club, to the boys. This was evident in the way some exercised leadership to create protocols around food, provide opportunities to use Pacific languages, enact

organisation, and manage timing. These leadership actions configured a space that encouraged participation, dialogue, high self-expectations and warm relationships.

However, innovation is never straight forward. I would not wish to over-claim for an initiative that had its share of false-starts, non-attendance and disruptions. For example, when a funeral of a significant community member took place, appropriately the PSS was poorly attended. Activities within the school, possibly because of poor communication, created conflicts of choice for students, such as the weather-related rescheduling of sports practices and the timing of a ‘credit catch up’ session for when a PSS was scheduled. In these cases, the PSS student leadership generally responded by prioritising other va than the PSS, illustrating the way various va are related.

Several factors suggest the salience of approaching Pacific educational space through a relational turn. Connection is a significant feature of the PISCPL (Gorinski, 2005), Po Ako (Kēpa, 2019) and the PSS. For example, one-to-one interpersonal relationships were a benefit of the PISCPL; enhancing the relational configuration of Western-influence school and Tongan cultures drove Po Ako; and deep brotherhood relationships in the PSS were leveraged to configure a space capable of positively affecting Pacific students’ self-perceptions. Further, some PSS staff expressed initial surprise on seeing specific attendees and their attention to study as if prior expectations and/or stereotypical perceptions were being challenged. The warmth expressed by some of the PSS teachers illustrates the interplay of cognition and emotionality and shows how the formation of deeper long-lasting connections can eclipse transactional relationships solely focused on one’s educational role.

## Conclusion

This article has followed the relational turn by bringing together the literatures of ILE and Pacific education. As a consequence, the critical relational space between the fields has provided a lens with which to examine some key aspects of learning spaces. Three examples can be given.

First, a relational approach advocates for a wide ecology that points to the relevance of the relationships between (Western-origin) school culture and cultures present in wider society. This is particularly significant in pluralistic contexts. In a wide ecology, innovation can encompass the configuration of relationships between cultures as they are represented and operationalised in learning spaces. Where this is true, the holistic wisdom and ethics of non-Western relational concepts such as va can be valued. Re-evaluating space to take account of culture(s) has the potential to benefit Pacific (and other non-majority) students.

Second, a relational approach prioritises relationships as a key driver in education, and consideration of their improvement as an important element in innovation. For some, relational thinking may mean leaving the hierarchy of the factory behind, but for others this represents decolonisation.

Finally, it is instructive to consider educational space as relational space. No relational space is empty (Wendt, 1999) and, as suggested by Milne (2016), what may

seem empty is really the white space of domination. The va describes space as full of multi-dimensional connections, revealing educational spaces as resonant at physical, social and spiritual levels. Attention to these levels as sites of connection and as influential on learning can enhance the vocabulary of relationships in the ILE field, adding consequent attention to the learner as a whole person including as a cultural as well as a cognitive entity.

In sum, considering the relatively unexplored relationship between ILE literature and Pacific education offers additional ways of thinking about the place of culture when thinking about relationality learning environments as relational space. As a consequence, more inclusive discourse may be possible that pushes the bounds of innovation into a wider ecology of benefit to theorists, practitioners and learners alike.

**Acknowledgements** Respect is due to the Pacific students, parents and community members, academics and staff who travelled this journey with me. Also, to the reviewers for their helpful and supportive comments. 'Ofa atu, fa'afetai, ngā mihi.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions.

**Data Availability** N/A.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** Author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

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